



NEWS RELEASE

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NOAA FISHERIES HONORS OCEAN TRUST PRESIDENT AND FOUNDING DIRECTOR THOR LASSEN AS ENVIRONMENTAL HERO

The Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) presented Thor Lassen with an Environmental Hero Award on Earth Day for his outstanding efforts to promote grass-roots environmental stewardship and habitat restoration in support of the NOAA Community-based Restoration Program (CRP). The award was presented in the NOAA auditorium in front of nearly 600 children who joined their parents at work on Earth Day.

Held in conjunction with Earth Day celebrations, the Environmental Hero award honors NOAA volunteers for their "tireless efforts to preserve and protect our nation's environment."

"NOAA and the nation are fortunate to have such dedicated people volunteer so much of their time," said retired Navy Vice Adm. Conrad C. Lautenbacher, Ph. D., undersecretary of commerce for oceans and atmosphere and NOAA administrator. "They set a perfect example for others to follow in their communities. America needs many more Environmental Heroes like them."

Lassen is working through Ocean Trust's partnership with the NOAA CRP to respond to a significant fisheries habitat restoration challenge at the Bahia Grande in south Texas. The project will restore tidal flow to approximately 11,000 acres of the historically productive shallow water estuary, which was isolated from the Laguna Madre during the construction of the Brownsville ship channel in the early 1930's. Bahia Grande has remained dry since that time, and the salty dust that blows out of the basin between Brownsville and Port Isabel, Texas, is at the root of numerous industrial and health problems experienced in the area.

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Lassen has coordinated the restoration project with NOAA and partners from the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, the Gulf of Mexico Foundation, Coastal Conservation Association, University of Texas at Brownsville/Texas Southmost College, and the local commercial shrimping industry. To date, a mangrove nursery has been established to provide native plants for the restoration effort, and educational programs have been implemented to build community support for the project. Groundbreaking for construction of the channels that will restore tidal flow to the Bahia Grande is scheduled for the summer of 2004.

Lassen grew up in Hampton, Va., on the Chesapeake Bay. He earned a B.A. in Environmental Science from the University of Virginia and a Master of Marine Science from the Virginia Institute of Marine Science at the College of William and Mary. He previously served as a Sea Grant fellow, as a representative of the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, as the Executive Secretary for the National Council of Fishing Vessels Safety and Insurance, and in a variety of capacities with the National Fisheries Institute, the National Fisheries Education and Research Foundation, and the East Coast Tuna Association. Since founding Ocean Trust in 1992, Lassen has worked to develop programs linking the interests of the seafood industry to the conservation of marine ecosystems and ocean wildlife.

“On behalf of the 12,500 men and women working for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, I am pleased to present you with this 2004 Environmental Hero Award,” Lautenbacher wrote in a letter to the recipients. “Your dedicated efforts and outstanding accomplishments greatly benefit the environment and make our nation a better place for all Americans.”

There are a total of 33 winners—30 individuals and three organizations. Visit the NOAA Earth Day Web site at <http://www.noaa.gov/earthday> to read more about this year's award winners.

The Community-based Restoration Program (CRP), a financial and technical assistance program within the NOAA Fisheries Office of Habitat Conservation, promotes strong partnerships at the national, regional and local level to fund grassroots, community-based activities. The NOAA-funded projects provide strong on-the-ground habitat restoration components that offer educational and social benefits for people and their communities in addition to long-term ecological benefits for fishery resources. More information about the CRP can be found at: <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/habitat/restoration>.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of the nation's coastal and marine resources. For more information about NOAA please visit: <http://www.noaa.gov>.